



# Understanding anxiety and depression



[beyondblue.org.au](https://beyondblue.org.au)



1300 22 4636



# Anxiety

On average, one in three women and one in five men will experience anxiety in their lifetime. Over 2 million people in Australia experience anxiety each year.<sup>1</sup>

## What is anxiety?

Anxiety is more than just feeling stressed or worried. While stress and anxious feelings are a common response to a situation where we feel under pressure, they usually pass once the stressful situation has passed, or 'stressor' is removed.

Anxiety is when these anxious feelings don't go away – when they're ongoing, more extreme reactions to a situation, and can happen without any particular reason or cause. It's a serious condition that makes it hard to cope with daily life. Everyone feels anxious from time to time, but for someone experiencing anxiety, these feelings aren't easily controlled.

It's important to seek support early if you're experiencing anxiety. Your symptoms may not go away on their own and if left untreated, they can start to escalate.

For more information on anxiety visit [beyondblue.org.au/anxiety](https://beyondblue.org.au/anxiety)

The information in this document is general advice only. The advice within it may therefore not apply to your circumstances and is not intended to replace the advice of a healthcare professional.

## How do you know if you have anxiety?

The symptoms of anxiety are sometimes not all that obvious as they often develop slowly and, given that we all experience symptoms of anxiety at various points in our lives, it can be hard to know how much is too much.

Some common symptoms of anxiety are panic attacks, tightening of the chest, excessive fear or worry, obsessive thinking and compulsive behaviour, and avoidance of particular situations.

If you are familiar with any of these symptoms, check the more extensive list on the next page. It's not designed to provide a diagnosis – for that you'll need to see a doctor – but it can be used as a guide.

For more insight, complete our simple checklist at **[beyondblue.org.au/checklist](https://beyondblue.org.au/checklist)**

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**If you are concerned you (or someone you know) is experiencing anxiety, consult a GP or other health professional.**

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## Common symptoms of anxiety

### Behaviour

- withdrawing from, avoiding or fearing objects or situations which cause anxiety
- urges to perform certain rituals in a bid to relieve anxiety
- not being assertive (e.g. avoiding eye contact)
- difficulty making decisions
- safety cautious (e.g. frightened to be alone)

### Feelings

- overwhelmed
- fear (particularly when having to face certain objects, situations or events)
- excessive worry about physical symptoms/medical problems
- dread that something bad will happen
- constantly tense, nervous or on edge
- uncontrollable or overwhelming panic

### Thoughts

- "I'm going crazy."
- "I can't control myself."
- "I'm about to die."
- "People are judging me."
- finding it hard to stop worrying
- unwanted or intrusive thoughts
- having upsetting dreams or flashbacks
- feeling detached from your physical self

### Physical

- increased heart rate/racing heart
- shortness of breath
- vomiting, nausea or pain in the stomach
- dizzy, lightheaded or faint
- muscle tension and pain (e.g. sore back)
- having trouble sleeping
- sweating, shaking, numbness or tingling
- hot or cold flushes

## Types of anxiety

The six most common types of anxiety are:

### **Generalised anxiety disorder (GAD)**

A person feels anxious on most days, worrying about lots of different things, for a period of six months or more.

### **Social phobia**

A person has an intense fear of being criticised or embarrassed even in everyday situations such as speaking publicly, eating in public, being assertive at work or making small talk.

### **Specific phobias**

A person feels very fearful about a particular object or situation (e.g. having an injection or travelling on a plane) and may go to great lengths to avoid it. There are many different types of phobias.

### **Obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD)**

A person has ongoing unwanted and/or intrusive thoughts and fears that cause anxiety. Although the person may acknowledge these thoughts as silly, they often try to relieve their anxiety by carrying out certain behaviours or rituals. For example, a fear of germs and contamination can lead to constant washing of hands and clothes.

### **Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)**

This can happen any time from one month after a traumatic event (e.g. war, assault, accident, disaster). Symptoms can include difficulty relaxing, upsetting dreams or flashbacks, avoidance of anything related to the event, and sometimes feeling emotionally numb.

### **Panic disorder**

A person has panic attacks, which are intense and often uncontrollable feelings of anxiety combined with a range of physical symptoms. Someone having a panic attack may experience shortness of breath, chest pain, dizziness, excessive perspiration and can sometimes think they're having a heart attack or are about to die.

For more information on the different types of anxiety visit [beyondblue.org.au/types-of-anxiety](https://beyondblue.org.au/types-of-anxiety)



# Depression

Over 1 million people in Australia experience depression each year. On average, one in six women and one in eight men will experience depression in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup>

## What is depression?

While we all feel sad, moody or low from time to time, some people experience these feelings intensely, for long periods of time (weeks, months or even years) and sometimes without any apparent reason.

Depression is more than just a low mood – it's a serious condition that affects your physical and mental health.

Depression affects how you feel about yourself and makes life more difficult to manage from day to day.

The encouraging news is that there are a range of treatments, health professionals and services available to help with depression, as well as information on what you can do to help yourself.

## How do you know if you have depression?

You may be depressed if, for more than two weeks, you've felt sad, down or miserable most of the time, or have lost interest or pleasure in usual activities, and have also experienced several of the signs and symptoms across at least three of the categories on the next page.

It's important to remember that we all experience some of these symptoms sometimes and it may not necessarily mean you're depressed. Equally, not everyone who is experiencing depression will have all of these symptoms.

The symptoms will not provide a diagnosis – for that you'll need to see a health professional – but they can help to guide you and provide a better understanding of how you're feeling.

For more information on depression visit **[beyondblue.org.au/depression](https://beyondblue.org.au/depression)**

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**If you are concerned you (or someone you know) is experiencing depression, consult a GP or other health professional.**

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## **Common symptoms of depression**

### **Behaviour**

- not going out anymore
- not getting things done at work/school
- withdrawing from close family and friends
- relying on alcohol and sedatives
- not doing usual enjoyable activities
- unable to concentrate

### **Feelings**

- overwhelmed
- guilty
- irritable, frustrated
- lacking in confidence, indecisive
- disappointed
- pessimistic
- sad, miserable

### **Thoughts**

- “I’m a failure.”
- “It’s my fault.”
- “Nothing good ever happens to me.”
- “I’m worthless.”
- “Life’s not worth living.”
- “People would be better off without me.”

### **Physical**

- tired all the time
- sick and run down
- headaches and muscle pains
- churning gut
- sleep problems
- loss or change of appetite
- significant weight loss or gain



# Get support

People experiencing anxiety and/or depression can find it difficult to take the first step in seeking support. They may need the support of family, friends and a health professional.

There is no one proven way that people recover from anxiety or depression. However, there are a range of effective treatments and health professionals who can help people on the road to recovery.

There are plenty of things you can do for yourself to recover and stay well.

## What treatments are available?

Different types of anxiety and depression require different types of treatment. This may include physical exercise for preventing and treating mild anxiety or depression, through to psychological and medical treatment for more severe symptoms.

There are a range of treatments to help, but it's different for everybody. Beyond Blue's online publications *A guide to what works for anxiety* and *A guide to what works for depression* are a good place to start to understand the evidence behind the various treatments available.

**The important thing is finding the right treatment and the right health professional that works for you.**

For more, visit

**[beyondblue.org.au/treatment-options](https://beyondblue.org.au/treatment-options)**

## Who can assist

Anxiety and depression can go on for months, sometimes years, if left untreated, and can have many negative effects on your life. It's important to seek support early – the sooner you get treatment, the sooner you can recover.

Different health professionals offer different types of services and treatments.

If you think that you or someone you know may have anxiety or depression, talking to a GP is a good place to start. A GP can make a diagnosis, check for any physical health problem or medication that may be contributing to the anxiety and/or depression, and discuss treatment options.

For more information on who can assist, visit **[beyondblue.org.au/who-can-assist](https://beyondblue.org.au/who-can-assist)**

For a list of psychologists, psychiatrists, mental health nurses, social workers and occupational therapists with mental health expertise, visit **[beyondblue.org.au/find-a-professional](https://beyondblue.org.au/find-a-professional)**

## Recovery and staying well

Recovery can take time. As well as starting treatment, you'll find new ways to manage and live with the changes and challenges of having anxiety and/or depression.

While psychological and/or medical treatment can help, there are many ways people can help themselves recover and stay well, such as:

- learning to reduce and manage stress
- keeping up daily routines and scheduling fun feel-good activities that give a sense of achievement
- maintaining a healthy lifestyle
- cutting back on alcohol and other drugs
- recognising triggers and warning signs
- getting over setbacks.

For more on recovery and staying well, visit **[beyondblue.org.au/recovery-and-staying-well](https://beyondblue.org.au/recovery-and-staying-well)**

## How can I support someone with anxiety or depression?

### It's helpful to:

- let them know if you've noticed a change in their behaviour
- spend time talking about their experiences and let them know that you're there to listen without judgment
- help them to get information from a website, library or community health centre
- suggest they go to a doctor or health professional, and help make the appointment
- offer to go with them to their appointment
- encourage them to get enough sleep, exercise and to eat well
- encourage family and friends to invite them out and keep in touch, but don't pressure them to participate in activities
- encourage them to face their fears with support from their doctor/psychologist
- discourage them from using alcohol or other drugs to try to feel better
- contact a doctor or hospital if they become a threat to themselves or others, or put them in touch with Lifeline **13 11 14**.

### It's unhelpful to:

- put pressure on them by telling them to "snap out of it" or "get their act together"
- stay away or avoid them
- tell them they just need to stay busy or get out more
- pressure them to party more or wipe out how they're feeling with drugs and alcohol.

For more information on supporting someone, visit [beyondblue.org.au/supporting-someone-with-anxiety-or-depression](https://beyondblue.org.au/supporting-someone-with-anxiety-or-depression)



## Suicide and crisis support

If you are in an emergency, or at immediate risk of harm to yourself or others, please contact emergency services on 000 or Lifeline on 13 11 14.

<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2008). National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing: Summary of Results, 2007. Cat. no. (4326.0). Canberra: ABS.

## Where to find more information

### Beyond Blue

 [beyondblue.org.au](https://beyondblue.org.au)

Learn more about anxiety, depression and suicide prevention, or talk through your concerns with our Support Service. Our trained mental health professionals will listen, provide information, advice and brief counselling, and point you in the right direction so you can seek further support.

 **1300 22 4636**

Email or chat to us online at  
[beyondblue.org.au/getsupport](https://beyondblue.org.au/getsupport)

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### Head to Health

 [headtohealth.gov.au](https://headtohealth.gov.au)

Head to Health can help you find free and low-cost, trusted online and phone mental health resources.

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